



AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM

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STATEMENT BY DR. JAMES SHANLEY, PRESIDENT AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM FORT PECK COMMUNITY COLLEGE, POPLAR, MONTANA

HEARING ON

S. 1344 – NATIVE AMERICAN COMMERCIAL DRIVING TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ACT

COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS UNITED STATES SENATE

July 24, 2002

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before your Committee today. My name is Dr. James Shanley, and I am honored to be here in my capacity as president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and as president of Fort Peck Community College, which is located on the Great Plains of the Fort Peck Indian reservation in northeast Montana.

In 1972, six tribally controlled colleges established the American Indian Higher Education Consortium - AIHEC to provide a support network for its member institutions. Today AIHEC represents 32 Tribal Colleges and Universities in 12 states to specifically serve the higher education needs of American Indian students. Over the past three decades, tribal leaders have continued to recognize that only through local, culturally relevant, and holistic methods, can many American Indians succeed in higher education. Collectively, the tribal colleges currently serve approximately 30,000 full and part-time students from over 250 Federally recognized tribes. A majority of our member institutions offer two-year degrees and vocational certificates, with eight colleges offering baccalaureate degrees, and two that offer Masters degree programs. Together, we are proud to say we represent the most significant and successful development in American Indian education history, promoting achievement among students who would otherwise never know educational success.

Aiding Local Economic Development

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are deeply tied to the welfare of our respective communities. Our reservations are located in remote areas, and our populations are among the poorest in the nation. On average, median household income levels are only

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about half of the level for the U.S. population as a whole. Conditions on the reservations make for stagnant economies. Postsecondary educational programs at tribal colleges, including vocational education, make it possible for our students to train for and obtain jobs that offer stability, benefits, and a decent salary, which in turn reduce welfare dependence and provide an economic boost to local communities. Most importantly, these programs, and the resulting boost in employment, aid in providing a sense of self-sufficiency that is critical in moving the American Indian people forward.

Tribal colleges serve multiple roles in our communities: functioning as community centers, libraries, tribal archives, career and business center, economic development centers, and public meeting places. TCUs can also serve as a practical resource for upkeep of communal property. Programs such as the one proposed in S. 1344 that require the acquisition of equipment that can serve dual uses are a ready aid to tribal governments. When not in use by the college for training programs, this equipment can be utilized for reservation economic development projects, such as construction of student and community housing, paving of local roads, and hauling food supplies and building materials.

Funding History and Program Costs

Mr. Chairman, despite their remarkable accomplishments, tribal colleges remain the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the country. Funding for basic institutional operations for 24 reservation-based colleges is provided through the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act of 1978. Funding under the Act is authorized at \$6,000 per full-time Indian student (ISC). In Fiscal Year 2002, 21 years after funding for institutional operations was first appropriated under this Act, the tribal colleges are receiving just \$3,916 per ISC, less than two-thirds of the authorized level. While mainstream institutions enjoy a stable foundation of state and local support, TCUs rely on annual appropriations from the Federal government for their institutional operating funds. Because we are located on Federal trust land, states bear no obligation to fund our colleges. In fact, most states do not even pay our colleges for the non-Indian state resident students who account for approximately 20 percent of TCU enrollments.

Vocational education programs and workforce training are time-honored methods for improving the livelihoods of those who seek quality job skills in less time than it takes for a more formal course of study. However, in the past, basic instruction in a trade, any trade, was considered sufficient to fulfill the Federal government's obligation to educate American Indians. Often, the vocational education programs for American Indians were limited to what the Federal government offered through the G.I. Bill, regardless of their suitability to the needs of the students or the areas in which they lived.

TCUs now offer a wide range of vocational education specifically tailored to the needs of the students and their communities. Today, as this legislation recognizes, there is a tremendous need for commercial vehicle drivers and that need will only increase. This legislation would enable TCUs to expand even further the range of employment

possibilities available to American Indian students and provide them with entry into this rapidly expanding and lucrative job market.

One of the reasons only a few of the tribal colleges offer programs in commercial vehicle operations is the prohibitive startup costs. The per-student cost estimates do not take into account the enormous expense of equipment acquisition and maintenance. A brand new tractor-trailer of the type frequently seen on our nation's highways would cost about \$150,000. Tribal colleges can obtain a sufficiently reliable used vehicle for about a third of that amount, but often the expense of frequent repairs and additional maintenance negate any temporary surplus in a program's budget. Furthermore, equipment must be brought up to legal standards of use once purchased, which can run as much as an additional \$30,000.

There are also considerable costs involved in the day-to-day running of vocational education programs such as training commercial vehicle drivers. Salish Kootenai College, on the Flathead Reservation in Western Montana, currently spends \$300,000 annually on its Highway Construction Worker program, approximately \$12,500 per student, and this does not include equipment acquisition costs. Our certificate program in Truck Driving/Heavy Equipment at Fort Peck Community College has similar per student costs. Our colleges receive no state aid, and are currently funding these programs through a patchwork of Federal grants and when necessary, deductions from other already stretched operating budgets.

Another strain to already stretched resources is the expense of securing a sufficient number of certified instructors to meet the instructor-to-student ratio necessary to satisfy our strict accreditation standards. Programs like these that are based largely on hands-on experience make larger class sizes ineffective and unsafe. When class sizes balloon, we must cut down on course offerings or risk going over our budget for faculty, and ultimately it is the students who pay the price.

Of course, students not only need to be instructed in the fundamentals of their chosen trade, but in basic job seeking and related skills as well. Today's Tribal Colleges and Universities address both of these needs in a way that not only satisfies our students financially, but psychologically as well. A clear example of this is the Highway Construction Worker program at Salish Kootenai College where students are required to complete a course in job seeking skills, which prepares them to be effective competitors for employment in their chosen field. Such a comprehensive approach is invaluable in taking these programs from the abstract into that which is truly a tool for empowerment.

We fully support this measure as providing positive assistance for our students to realize their full potential and offer great benefits to the economic health of our communities. Tribal colleges are deeply appreciative of any means through which they can increase and stabilize funding in operations and program areas.

Legislative Recommendations

Mr. Chairman, the proposed legislation does not mention specific language about the level of funding or the duration of the grants, only the number of grants available. As noted earlier, vocational education programs not only have tremendous start-up costs but considerable day-to-day operational expenses as well. One concern we have is expending the significant costs involved for a college to start a training program that would only be funded for one or two years. Without adequate funding levels and enough time for each grant award, programs could be set up to fail.

The awarding of three- to five-year grants would solve this problem by providing stable funding to get a program up and running. In addition, we suggest that the legislation not limit to four the number of grants that may be awarded by the Secretary of Labor but, instead, specify an adequate amount of funding to support that number of grants. For example, $\$300,000 \times 4 = \1.2 million per year for five years – in other words a \$6 million program. If additional funding can be secured for this program, the Secretary would not be limited to four awards, thereby allowing more colleges the chance to offer this valuable program to their students.

We also believe that there could be additional employment opportunities if the proposed definition of “commercial vehicle driving” in Section 3 of the legislation were expanded beyond, “driving of a vehicle which is a tractor-trailer truck,” thereby giving the tribal colleges the flexibility to train students to do other truck and heavy equipment driving such as construction and logging trucks, water tankers and other vehicles requiring commercial licenses.

There are also a few technical changes that we would respectfully suggest be made to S. 1344 and I will ask that our AIHEC staff address those minor changes with the staff of the Committee, with whom they have long enjoyed a very productive working relationship.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I want to reiterate that the Tribal Colleges and Universities are committed to educating and training American Indian people and to moving more people from welfare to work. We are committed to revitalizing our communities and America’s economy through education and training in areas of need, and we are committed to plowing any investment made by the Congress back into the education and training system in Indian Country.

We appreciate this Committee’s long-standing support of tribal colleges, and we look forward to working with you to improving access to postsecondary educational and training opportunities for the betterment of American Indian students, and their communities.